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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE PASS TO HHS/OGHA (STIEGER/VALDEZ/HICKEY)
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ADMINISTRATION

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SUBJECT: CRAWLING FROM THE WRECKAGE: VIETNAM'S DEADLY ROADWAYS

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¶1. (U) Summary: Traffic accidents are Vietnam's unrecognized killers, leading to many more deaths than HIV/AIDS and avian influenza combined. As Vietnam has become increasingly prosperous, the number of motor vehicles, primarily motorbikes, on Vietnamese roads has skyrocketed. Large numbers of poorly trained and ill-equipped drivers lead to more and more traffic fatalities. Meanwhile, hospitals do not have the resources to care for road accident victims. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) recently passed updated road safety legislation, including a revised helmet law, to take effect by the end of this year. Several donors have launched public safety campaigns. Together, these efforts might have an impact. End Summary.

Get Your Motor Runnin': Motor Vehicles Keep Increasing

¶2. (U) Per official statistics, as of December 2006, Vietnam had over 21 million motorbikes (one for every four citizens), though observers believe that figure may under-represent the actual number. Vietnam is the fastest motorizing nation in the world with motorbikes increasing by 15 percent (about 2 million units) each year. Ho Chi Minh City alone has 3.2 million motorcycles and 316,000 autos legally registered with additional 500,000 motorcycles and 60,000 autos registered elsewhere on Ho Chi Minh City roads. An additional one million other motorized vehicles (including automobiles, trucks, and buses), together with millions of bicycles and pedestrians, clog Vietnam's limited thoroughfares. Vietnam's National Traffic Safety Commission (NTSC) expects significant increases in cars and buses, leading to more traffic congestion and more collisions with motorbikes.

Highway to Hell: Traffic Accidents and Road Deaths

¶3. (U) With rapid transition to motor vehicles, the World Health Organization (WHO) predicts road accidents will become the third leading cause of death in Asia by 2020. Vietnam is a dubious pace-setter with a four-fold increase in traffic accidents over the past 10 years. According to official statistics, 35 people die and nearly 70 suffer brain trauma each day from road accidents, with at least 12,000 dead and 17,000 seriously injured in 2007 alone. Vietnam's over-all traffic-related mortality rate is nearly double that of high-income countries. Traffic accidents are the largest cause of death for Vietnamese between 18 and 45 years of age. According to the WHO, while Vietnamese between 15 and 24 make up 20

percent of the total national population, they account for 40 percent of total severe road traffic crashes. According to the NTSC, Vietnamese highways are particularly dangerous, as 55 percent of accidents occur on national highways and 25 percent on provincial highways, compared with 17 percent in urban areas.

I Can't Drive 55: Why Are There So Many Accidents

14. (U) Nguyen Trong Thai, Deputy Chief of the NTSC Secretariat, recently told ESTHOff that 80 percent of accidents occur due to non-compliance with traffic regulations, 35 percent of which are due to violations of speed limits. Not surprisingly, accidents spike during holiday periods as travel and alcohol consumption increase. In a 2005 survey, 30 percent of interviewees admitted to drinking and driving. According to GVN statistics, from 2001 to 2003, 34 percent of traffic fatalities tested positive for alcohol in their bloodstream. Many deaths and serious injuries occur because motorists fail to use safety equipment. The NTSC estimates that, as of mid-2007, only 3 percent of motorbike riders wore helmets. A survey on casualties conducted at the Viet Duc Hospital in Hanoi found that 79 percent of traffic accident victims did not wear helmets, fasten safety belts or use other safety equipment.

Running on Empty: Health and Economic Impacts

15. (U) Vietnam's high rate of traffic accidents slows economic growth and burdens its public health system. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that traffic deaths and injuries cost the Vietnamese economy close to US \$885 million each year (2.45% of GDP). Road accidents kill many family breadwinners, plunging thousands into poverty. Per the Vietnam Administration of Preventive Medicine, the price of traffic accident related hospitalizations in 2004 totaled nearly 12 trillion Vietnamese dong (approximately USD 750 million). More recent numbers likely are much higher. Vietnamese doctors describe trauma centers as

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"gridlocked" due to the high volume of head injuries from road accidents, with hospitals and emergency services overwhelmed, particularly during holiday periods, and unable to focus on other injuries and diseases. Hospitals in major cities, such as Viet Duc hospital in Hanoi and Cho Ray hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, are forced to treat road accident victims from large geographical areas as provincial hospitals are not equipped to handle serious injuries, particularly head trauma. Vietnam's poor road safety also impacts Americans, as the Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City estimated at least five deaths of American Citizens in traffic related accidents in the past year.

Highway Patrolman: GVN Response

16. (U) Concerned that public education campaigns had raised awareness, but not compliance, with traffic regulations, on June 29, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed Resolution 32. The resolution, which the NTSC started drafting in December 2006, focuses on seven areas: 1) increasing public awareness, 2) increasing sanctions for violations of traffic laws (e.g., speeding, wrong way on one-way roads), 3) managing quality of vehicles, 4) driver training and education, 5) helmet laws, 6) improved management of traffic safety, and 7) infrastructure improvements. Most notably, Resolution 32 made helmets mandatory on highways and for civil servants beginning September 15 and mandatory for all motorists on all roads beginning December 15 of this year. The new law increased fines dramatically, up to 150,000 dong (approximately USD 9.25) for non-compliance.

17. (SBU) In actuality, Resolution 32 enforces many laws already on the books. For example, the GVN required helmets for motorists as early as 1995, though the failure to publish implementing regulations led motorists to treat the requirements as voluntary. This time, according to Thai at the NTSC, the GVN already has introduced implementing regulations and published quality standards for helmets. Greig Craft, President of the Asia Injury Prevention

Foundation (registered as a U.S. 501(c)(3) non-profit), which manufacturers Protec motorbike helmets at a facility outside of Hanoi, told ESTHOff that while he had heard rumors of slightly delayed implementation of the nationwide helmet requirement, he remained optimistic that the GVN had the political willpower and resources to implement this new mandate. Craft also noted that for the past several years, Protec had produced 100,000-150,000 helmets per year. It now produces 150,000 helmets each month and cannot meet consumer demand - a strong sign that Vietnamese motorists expect the government to enforce the law.

20 Miles of Bad Highway: Challenges

18. (SBU) GVN enforcement efforts face many challenges, beginning with a lack of resources to improve the underlying road infrastructure, standardize driving education and motor vehicle inspections, and employ enough traffic police to adequately monitor driving behavior. Inconsistent and sporadic enforcement also will open the traffic police to claims of corruption (above and beyond the normal, everyday shakedowns) and could quickly dissolve public willingness to follow the law. Some motorists complain that they cannot find helmets, particularly for children, and that the lack of supply has driven up prices. Protec's Craft expects additional helmet imports from Taiwan and Japan to arrive shortly, but worries about substandard domestic helmets (estimated by Craft at about 50 percent of the market) and counterfeit products coming overland from China.

Convoy: Donor Assistance

19. (U) Several donors have begun to focus on this major public health issue. AIPF is coordinating the Vietnam Helmet Wearing Campaign (to which the US Embassy made a modest USD 1000 contribution), through which other governments, international organizations and private sector partners (including Intel Vietnam) are funding public awareness campaigns promoting helmet use. AIPF is seeking an additional USD 1 million to broaden the message after the helmet law comes into effect and to prepare for possible future actions to promote seatbelt usage or prevent drunk driving. In 2005, the World Bank approved a credit of USD 30 million to fund a four-year road safety project. The ADB and the Japan International Cooperation Agency also are funding road safety improvements as part of transportation infrastructure loans. In September, the Bloomberg

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Family Foundation, set up by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, contributed USD 9 million to the World Health Organization to carry out road safety programs in Vietnam and Mexico focusing on increasing the use of motorcycle helmets, seat-belts and child restraints, reducing drink-driving, and improving the visibility of pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.

Comment

110. (U) The GVN and donors are attempting to reduce the carnage on Vietnamese roadways. However, improvements in traffic infrastructure and increases in helmet usage only address part of the road safety problem. The GVN and Vietnamese civil society need to take more aggressive steps to change the unsafe behavior of Vietnamese motorists, particularly speeding, drunk driving, and refusing to wear seatbelts. With many years of experience working to change American driving behavior, the USG and advocacy organizations could help provide technical assistance and guidance to their Vietnamese counterparts on public education campaigns, law enforcement, and road and car safety engineering.

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